

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.

The Military and The Drug War: Operational Art at an Impasse?

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College of the Department of the Navy.


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13 June 1997

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DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 4

19970520 178

 2/3/97  
Faculty Advisor Date  
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## REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED	
2. Security Classification Authority:	
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:	
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.	
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT	
6. Office Symbol:  C	7. Address: NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207
8. Title (Include Security Classification):  The Military and the Drug War: Operational Art at an Impasse? (U)	
9. Personal Authors: LCDR Stephen L. Guse, USN	
10. Type of Report: FINAL	11. Date of Report: 7 Feb 1997
12. Page Count: 24	
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.	
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: Drug war. Counter-drug. Drug interdiction.	
15. Abstract: America has been losing the war on drugs for over fifteen years. Why? This paper will examine the reasons for the limited success enjoyed by United States government agencies, and in particular, the military. Some of the major causes of frustration for the military in fighting this perplexing war include: lack of training, lack of desire, lack of funded programs, interagency coordination problems, difficulties with operational design, difficulties coordinating operations with other nations, inability to translate the stated national strategy into achievable military objectives, absence of a flexible infrastructure, limited diplomatic success, lack of a unified command structure, and widespread corruption of foreign agencies at all levels. Each of these has contributed to a rather ineffective counter-drug campaign which has left many national agencies frustrated. The courageous men and women who risk their lives fighting this tragic war are in search of a more robust and efficacious counter-drug strategy. This essay will examine the limited role which the military plays in counter-drug operations, analyze how the strategic goals and objectives of the National Drug Control Strategy are pursued by military planners, and illustrate how a more aggressive military strategy is not likely to foster better results.	

16.Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified X	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
17.Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
18.Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
19.Telephone: 841-6461		20.Office Symbol: C	

Security Classification of This Page Unclassified

### Abstract

America has been losing the war on drugs for over fifteen years. Why? In many respects the United States counter-drug war can be likened to "herding cats." This paper will examine the reasons for the limited success enjoyed by United States government agencies, and in particular, the military. Some of the major causes of frustration for the military in fighting this perplexing war include: lack of training, lack of desire, lack of funded programs, interagency coordination problems, difficulties with operational design, difficulties coordinating operations with other nations, inability to translate the stated national strategy into achievable military objectives, absence of a flexible infrastructure, limited diplomatic success, lack of a unified command structure, and widespread corruption of foreign agencies at all levels. Each of these has contributed to a rather ineffective counter-drug campaign which has left many national agencies frustrated. The courageous men and women who risk their lives fighting this tragic war are in search of a more robust and efficacious counter-drug strategy. This essay will examine the limited role which the military plays in counter-drug operations, analyze how the strategic goals and objectives of the National Drug Control Strategy are pursued by military planners, and illustrate how a more aggressive military strategy is not likely to foster better results.

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America is losing another war-- the war on drugs--a war which its military has been fighting for over fifteen years. Yet, few people even realize that the military is involved in the drug war. U.S. military involvement in the war on drugs seldom receives headlines, indeed it is rarely mentioned in the press even when a large drug interdiction operation is successful. Occasionally, when a high profile drug seizure makes the news, credit is typically given to an appropriate law enforcement agency such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), U.S. Customs Service, or the FBI.

Illicit drug trafficking and usage have had a deleterious effect on American society for many years, and indeed have threatened to destroy the American social fabric--clearly the country's greatest resource. America contains just five percent of the world's population, yet, unfortunately Americans consume about fifty percent of the world's cocaine. This gluttonous appetite lures the drug traffickers to focus their efforts on America, giving them an exceptionally lucrative market which is relatively easy to penetrate. Unfortunately, it also creates overwhelming problems for the military and law enforcement officials as the traffickers continue to develop new and innovative ways to get their products distributed.

Drug use has many side effects other than the main problem of destroying lives and families. Chief among these side effects are drug related crime, increased medical costs, backlogs in the legal system, and a host of other difficulties such as job related production losses and absenteeism, increased insurance premiums, etc. Many of these drug related problems have resulted in serious setbacks for government, industry, and consumers alike, and the cost is usually absorbed by the taxpayers.

The United States military has been involved in America's war on drugs since 1 December 1981 when Congress modified the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 which had previously prohibited U.S. military forces from engaging in law enforcement activities.<sup>1</sup> The modification, signed by President Reagan on 4 December, directed U.S. intelligence agencies to cooperate with law enforcement offices in a coordinated effort to boost the efficacy of counter-drug activities. This legislation launched the Department of Defense (DOD) into the drug war--a war which it is still fighting today.

Sadly perhaps, one needs only to view a routine evening news broadcast to see that the U.S. military, in conjunction with other agencies, has enjoyed less than spectacular success in this behind the scenes war. The military has been a key player in some small, sporadic victories, "but the consensus among U.S. government experts is that interdiction has, at best, reduced the supply of heroin and cocaine on U.S. streets at any one time by no more than 10 percent."<sup>2</sup> Why is it that the military has not been very effective? One would think that this sort of operation would be relatively easy, particularly considering America's awesome military might and its stunning display of high-technology weaponry during the well-publicized victory in the Gulf War. We will see that the answer is partially that the military role is tightly controlled, that the military counter-drug effort is operated with limited funds, and that even if the military were given an expanded role the outcome might not be radically different than history has shown.

Although the 1981 Act signed by President Reagan was the impetus for DOD involvement in the drug war, the military did not become heavily active in counter-drug operations until the President signed the 1989 Defense Authorization Act which named

DOD as the lead agency for detection and monitoring of illicit drug trafficking in the transit zone. Moreover, this Act declared that America's drug problem was now a national security concern. Still, as the figures in Tables I & II below show, the amount of drugs seized remained fairly constant despite yearly increases in the federal drug control budget. There are surely many reasons for this, and success is certainly not a function of the budget alone, but one would think that if increasing amounts of money were spent over a sizable duration of time, the overall results would improve. Perhaps an examination of some budget issues can offer a partial explanation. As Table I depicts, the annual budget for fiscal year (FY) 95 was \$13.2 billion, yet only \$850 million, or 6 percent, was allocated to the international effort which includes the military and Coast Guard.<sup>3</sup>

The U. S. Military has had some success in the drug war. In fact, the military has been quite successful in its primary mission of detection and monitoring of air and surface contacts in the transit zone. However, this is just one small part of the total effort which goes into the actual interdiction of drugs headed for U.S. markets.

Lack of interagency coordination at all levels is an ongoing problem which has hampered the overall counter-drug effort on numerous occasions. Sometimes the coordination problem is as simple as the military units not having the same type of communications equipment as the law enforcement agencies during a particular operation which thwarts an otherwise successful mission. In other cases it might be uncoordinated planning, or missed timing during execution.

An examination of the National Drug Control Strategy strategic goals and objectives from a military Joint Task Force (JTF) or Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) staff



planning standpoint suggests that the military may continue to have limited effectiveness in fighting the drug war. When a JTF or JIATF staff tackles the task of planning the overall drug interdiction efforts for its area of responsibility (AOR), typically a geographically segregated area, it must use a set of planning tools which are standardized and which will yield the highest probability of success. By utilizing the theories and practices known as operational art, and in particular operational design, a staff can begin to formulate a plan to thwart drug traffickers who attempt to transport illicit narcotics through the AOR. In many cases these initial planning considerations probably lead to the military officer's first signs of frustration in fighting the war on drugs. Simply stated, operational art is taking the national or strategic guidance and formulating a coherent campaign plan which the tacticians can then execute. That is, an operational artist will consider all relevant factors of his forces and his enemy's to determine the best course of action which will win the war.

In order to do this the planners must first consider the national guidance which will frame their initial planning efforts. Appendix A lists the strategic goals and objectives of the 1996 National Drug Control Strategy. A recently published article in the periodical *Foreign Service Journal* states, "The goal of U.S. drug policy has always been to curtail, if not eliminate, the flow of drugs into the United States, an idea simple in concept but difficult in execution."<sup>4</sup> A more accurate statement might be that curtailing or eliminating the flow of drugs into the United States is *a* goal, but not *the* goal, for drug interdiction in any form is not mentioned until the 17th of 23 national strategic objectives in the 1996 National Drug Control Strategy report. It is also interesting to note that of the 20

objectives listed, the military is powerless to act on all but two, and they are both under the 4th listed goal. This in itself is probably a source of frustration for the military. Many military leaders probably feel that if they are going to be tasked to do a mission then they should be given the necessary tools and support to accomplish it. Besides the hindrance of not being assigned the entire mission, the military also finds futility in the many legal nuances, interagency coordination challenges, and lack of focus which foil its efforts.

At a quick glance, one might be inclined to believe that a more robust military role would tend to produce better results. However, one reason why this assumption would probably prove to be false is due to the lack of a unified command structure. The major players in the drug war have specified tasks and usually work well together, but if the military were given a larger role, this might not continue to be the case. Currently the Office of National Drug Control Policy, headed by General McCaffery, is the prime source for overall policy. The U.S. Interdiction Coordinator is currently the Commandant of the Coast Guard whose primary role is transit zone interdiction operations. The other major agencies include the U.S. Customs Service, DEA, and the military, although there are many other federal, state, and local agencies involved. The military and interagency efforts are coordinated at JIATF East and West, as well as at JTF SIX. The problem for the military, should it be given a larger role, is that none of these agencies is subordinate to any other. In other words, no one would be in charge of the whole operation.

For many military units, involvement in the drug war is simply a sidelight. Moreover, this sidelight is sometimes forced upon them during an ambitious training cycle and offers very little in the way of training for their primary missions. Military operations conducted

in the austere fiscal climate of the 1990's have forced units to do more with less. Many units are facing compressed training cycles with fewer personnel to absorb the workload. In the midst of this struggle to maintain high combat readiness levels for their primary missions, they are thrust into counter-drug operations, usually away from home, and usually for a sizable duration.

In general, when faced with developing a military option for national tasking, a staff will review the national guidance which should contain the aims, resources, and constraints for the mission, determine the objective(s), address the desired end state which includes political, military, economic, and other considerations, identify the enemy's critical strengths and weaknesses, and finally develop an operational scheme. This process is termed operational design, and has several tenets. "The plan of any major operation or campaign should be based on a number of considerations, collectively called operational design, which ensure that one's own and friendly forces and assets are employed in a coherent manner and focused on the assigned operational or strategic goals in the theater."<sup>5</sup>

The first task to be undertaken when analyzing national guidance is to discover the aims of the strategy, or in other words, to define victory. The national drug control strategy has no such definition of victory, but does put forward the following as a statement of purpose: "The common purpose of that collective effort is to reduce illegal drug use and its consequences in America."<sup>6</sup> This ambiguous statement is of little use to military planners who are interested in designing a campaign to fight drug trafficking. It does not quantify "reduction," thus one could partially define victory as virtually any

amount of reduction, over an unspecified period of time. If a definition of victory were included, what would it be? This is not a trivial question; defining victory in the drug war is a very complex issue which ultimately would have to address many of the reasons for an ineffectual counter-drug program listed in the abstract. Certainly it would include a reduction in drugs which are available to distributors and users, but how much of a reduction? It is unrealistic to think that a counter-drug strategy, regardless of intensity, would result in complete eradication of drugs? A definition of victory would almost certainly need to address issues such as a marked decrease in corruption, increased international coordination, the development of standardized procedures for the various military, legal, and diplomatic situations which arise, crop substitution options, and perhaps would include commodity price fluctuations as a measure of effectiveness. A crude attempt at a definition of victory might be:

*Victory in the war on drugs will be declared when a climate of international cooperation exists which facilitates fair and realistic crop substitution alternatives, employs a vigorous corruption eradication program, develops a set of standard guidelines for the prosecution and sentencing of convicted traffickers, and utilizes a flexible military option which greatly increases the effectiveness of those units; all of which combine to sharply affect the street price of narcotics, and make it wholly unprofitable for cartels to operate.*

If a definition of victory existed which was even remotely close to this one, how would the military planner use it to develop a viable campaign? Clearly, the military planner is at a disadvantage when searching for national strategic guidance to help his planning efforts.

The next consideration for military planners is resources. The national drug control strategy includes a chapter which discusses resources, but concentrates solely on fiscal outlays. The budget includes about \$1.5 billion for the interdiction mission, just 10 percent of the total budget (see Table III). Helpful to the planner are other resource allocations such as forces, time, and space. Granted, these issues are not easily quantified, but some guidance, perhaps in a plan of actions and milestones (POA&M) format would be helpful for the military planning process.

Guidance which limits how and where military units operate is known as a restraint. These are usually well-known to military planners and operational units and generally result in a high level of frustration. For example, U.S. units are restricted from flying over another country's sovereign airspace while pursuing a suspected air contact, severely limiting military effectiveness. Although this is a difficult problem to solve, the solution will almost certainly involve cooperation from the military or law enforcement agencies of other countries.

A critical step for military planners is the development of attainable objectives. Without an objective, a military unit will be left hopelessly adrift and unable to focus upon its mission. Military objectives can be strategic, operational, or tactical. Although the strategic objectives for the drug war are listed in Appendix A, development of operational objectives is not a trivial matter. Some examples of operational objectives for the Caribbean theater might be detection and classification of all air contacts in theater, and tracking and interception of all intelligence corroborated surface drug carriers in theater. But how can a military planner or operations officer develop operational objectives which

possess more depth than these? If, for example, an objective is to eradicate a percentage of the crops in the theater, it will likely turn out to be an operational-strategic objective which will involve more of the diplomatic corps' efforts than the military's. In these situations, the military design artist or planner is hampered by politics, and thus his missions become extremely limited in scope. When viewing the overall scheme of the drug war, particularly against the backdrop of the Posse Comitatus Act, it becomes fairly clear why the military was given the lead only in detection and monitoring.

Another important task for the design artist is to promulgate a desired end state. The desired end state can include political, military, and economic factors. For the drug war, the strategic end state includes a vast reduction in the number of people who use illegal drugs. Again, this is difficult to quantify, but also includes eradicating the associated problems of crime, increased medical costs, worker absenteeism, etc. Militarily, the end state could be stated simply as a cessation of illicit narcotics entering the United States through illegal transit. If one looked solely at the mission for which the military has been designated as the lead agency, then the desired end state would be the detection and monitoring of all traffic in the transit zone--a state which nearly exists today. But is this really victory? Certainly the military cannot claim victory by simply detecting and monitoring traffic when a vast percentage of the narcotics continue to reach the distribution centers. This question once again uncovers the numerous coordination problems which are encountered on a daily basis.

An economic end state is an extremely complex issue. "Depriving impoverished farmers of their livelihood--even if from raising illegal crops--has created serious political

problems in nations such as Peru and Bolivia.”<sup>7</sup> Many of these issues are interrelated, such as the relationship between the economic impact of the local farms in Peru, Colombia, and Bolivia which produce nearly all of the coca leaf for the world’s cocaine production, and the political effects of crop eradication. The technology exists to eradicate a sizable portion of the coca plants, but this seems only to cause more problems. “Although all three countries signed the 1989 U.N. Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, which requires them to suppress illegal drug crops, the internal pressures to resist are enormous. For many thousands of farmers in this Andean region, there is as yet no real alternative to growing coca or opium poppies, since no other crop brings comparable financial compensation. The linkages between guerrilla insurgencies and the drug traffic create additional difficulties for the governments of Peru and Colombia.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly, the economic end state requires serious consideration and will not easily be obtained.

Once a desired end state is identified, the next task facing the military staff is to determine the enemy’s critical factors. This step includes identification of the critical strengths and weaknesses, both tangible and intangible, and finally to decide upon a center of gravity. Once again, this process presents unique difficulties when planning for the war on drugs. Some tangible strengths of the drug operatives include the cartels themselves. The strongest cartels operate within the local infrastructure, have the needed capital to influence politicians and affect the economy, and most have fairly capable “armies” to protect their assets. Moreover, the cartel leaders are readily replaceable should one of them become captured, imprisoned, or killed. The drug supply to America has never been

seriously threatened, even when a large cartel has been crippled, mostly because the other cartels relish the opportunity to step in. "After the Colombian government dismembered the murderous Medellin cartel with the manhunt and killing of Pablo Escobar in December 1993, the Cali group of Gilberto Rodriguez Orejuela and friends picked up the slack."<sup>9</sup>

Another tangible strength is the cartel's logistics networks and delivery systems. They are innovative and adaptable, and essentially have countered each detection system which the law enforcement agencies have developed. The complex network of delivering drugs to the distribution centers in the U.S. consists of relatively low technology, but highly effective methods of transport. The most critical strategic strength is the coca and poppy crops.

Some intangible strengths include the will of the cartels to continue their operations, availability of legal channels--such as legitimate businesses--which facilitate money laundering operations, commodity pricing (the fact that the business is lucrative, and there are no crop substitution options), and global--mainly U.S.--demand.

Weaknesses of the cartels include international moral sanctions, long transit lines, and generally low technology equipment. In an effort to exploit these weaknesses, the U.S. military has targeted the lines of transit in its interdiction efforts. There is probably heated debate at all levels over these and other strengths and weaknesses--there is no right or wrong answer.

The job of the operational artist is to now review the strengths, refine them to identify critical strengths, identify a center of gravity, and then devise a scheme to destroy the center of gravity and "win" the war. The strategic centers of gravity for the drug war are



the crops and the cartels. The operational center of gravity might be the logistics chain, the dispersed methods of transportation, the cartels, or others. Again it can be seen that identifying a center of gravity is difficult and can change throughout the campaign. For the military, however, a concrete center of gravity can be as illusive as the drugs themselves.

The question which must now be asked is: given the thin guidance described above, can the military planner have any success designing a scheme (method of defeating the opponent) which will meet the mission objectives and satisfy the desired end state in the drug war?

It doesn't take a military genius to discover that this is a daunting, if not illusory task. And one must ask an additional question: suppose the military were directed to pursue the drug war as its primary mission; would this necessarily solve all the problems? If the answer tends toward the negative, perhaps this explains the limited roles assigned to the military in the drug war and the fact that it is the lead agency for detection and monitoring only. "Still, when discussing the nation's drug policy, it is time to turn away from a war analogy, as General Barry McCaffrey, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, has suggested."<sup>10</sup>

The war on drugs is a complex, multi-faceted, and long-term campaign whose noble purpose is unfortunately too often eclipsed by the tenacity of the drug cartels. There may be no perfect solution, but a comprehensive strategy which combines a vigorous education and treatment effort with a determined interdiction campaign should produce reasonable results. The challenges facing military planners are not likely to become easier, and

perhaps one of their biggest challenges is to reinvigorate the spirit of cooperation. A greater military role is probably not the answer, not necessarily because the military is incapable of successfully combating the traffickers, but because of the inherent weaknesses such as lack of training, lack of funding, and lack of focus. This lack of focus is directly related to the inability of the operational planners to formulate a coherent operational scheme from the given national objectives. For the operational artist, the drug war presents an endless series of unique and demanding problems, the solutions to which are usually not found in a textbook.

## TABLES

**Table I<sup>11</sup>**

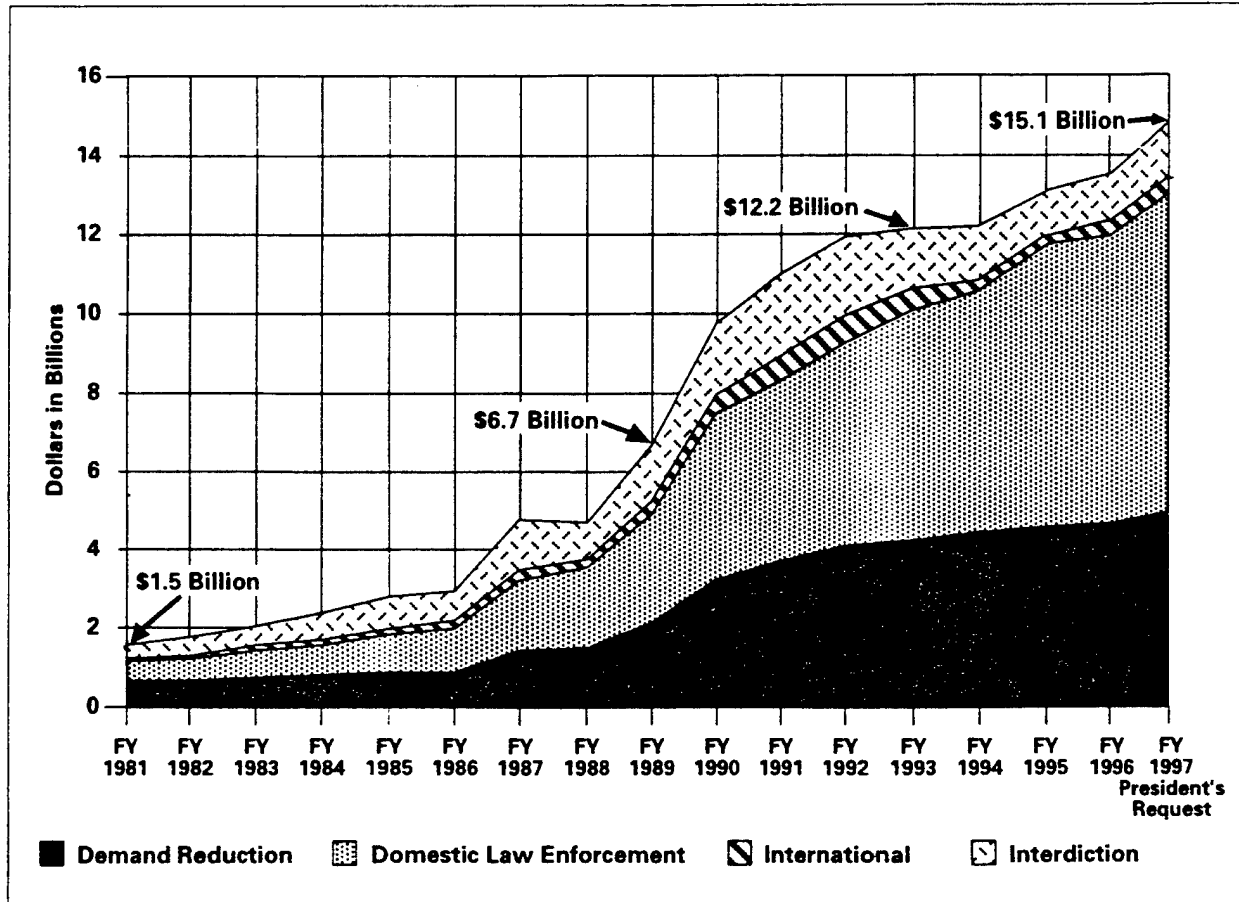
	Federal Drug Control Budget (in millions of dollars)						
	<u>1989</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>1991</u>	<u>1992</u>	<u>1993</u>	<u>1994</u>	<u>1995</u>
Funds	6664	9759	10957	11910	12178	12184	13251

**Table II<sup>12</sup>**

	Federal-wide Cocaine, Heroin, and Cannabis Seizures						
	<u>1989</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>1991</u>	<u>1992</u>	<u>1993</u>	<u>1994</u>	<u>1995</u>
Cocaine (metric tons)	99.2	107.3	111.7	137.8	110.8	130.0	100.5
Heroin (kg)	1,095	815	1,374	1,157	1,595	1,270	1,146
Cannabis (X1000 lbs)	----	500.4	677.3	787.4	772.3	794.0	1003.4

TABLE III<sup>13</sup>

Federal Drug Control Spending by Function, 1981-97



## Notes

1. Thomas W. Crouch, *An Annotated Bibliography on Military involvement in Counterdrug Operations, 1980-1990*, p. 3.
2. Shlaudeman, Harry W. And Thompson, Kenneth W. "Focus on US Drug Policy: In Washington, Maintaining Pressure." *Foreign Service Journal*, p. 22.
3. Shlaudeman, Harry W. And Thompson, Kenneth W. "Focus on US Drug Policy: In Washington, Maintaining Pressure." *Foreign Service Journal*, p. 27.
4. Shlaudeman, Harry W. And Thompson, Kenneth W. "Focus on US Drug Policy: In Washington, Maintaining Pressure." *Foreign Service Journal*, p. 21.
5. Vego, Milan. *Fundamentals of Operational Design*. P. 1.
6. *The National Drug Control Strategy: 1996*. The White House, 1996, p. 11.
7. Shlaudeman, Harry W. And Thompson, Kenneth W. "Focus on US Drug Policy: In Washington, Maintaining Pressure." *Foreign Service Journal*, p. 22.
8. Ibid. p. 23.
9. Ibid. p. 22.
10. Ibid. p. 26.
11. *The National Drug Control Strategy: 1996*. The White House, 1996, p. 77.
12. Ibid. p. 94.
13. Ibid. p. 61.

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## Appendix A

### **Strategic Goals and Objectives of the 1996 National Drug Control Strategy**

**Goal 1: Motivate America's youth to reject illegal drugs and substance abuse.**

Objective 1: Increase the number of State governments and community organizations participating in the development of national prevention standards and a national prevention infrastructure.

Objective 2: Increase the number of schools with comprehensive drug prevention and early intervention strategies with a focus on family involvement.

Objective 3: Increase the number of community drug coalitions through a focus on the need for public support of local drug prevention empowerment efforts.

Objective 4: Increase, through public education, the public's awareness of the consequences of illicit drug use and the use of alcohol and tobacco by underage populations.

Objective 5: Reverse the upward trend in marijuana use among young people and raise the average age of initial users of all illicit drugs.

**Goal 2: Increase the safety of America's citizens by substantially reducing drug-related crime and violence.**

Objective 1: Increase the effectiveness of local police through the implementation of community and problem-oriented policing with a focus on youth and gang violence, drug-related homicides, and domestic violence.

Objective 2: Break the cycle of drug abuse and crime by integrating drug testing, court-authorized graduated sanctions, treatment, offender tracking and rehabilitation, and aftercare through drug courts and other offender management programs, prison rehabilitation and education, and supervised transition to the community.



Objective 3: Increase the effectiveness of Federal, State, and local law enforcement task forces that target all levels of trafficking to reduce the flow of drugs to neighborhoods and make our streets safe for the public.

Objective 4: Improve the efficiency of Federal drug law enforcement investigative and intelligence programs to apprehend drug traffickers, seize their drugs, and forfeit their assets.

Objective 5: Increase the number of schools that are free of drugs and violence.

Goal 3: Reduce health, welfare, and crime costs resulting from illegal drug use.

Objective 1: Increase treatment efficiency and effectiveness.

Objective 2: Use effective outreach, referral, and case management efforts to facilitate early access to treatment.

Objective 3: Reduce the spread of infectious diseases and other illnesses related to drug use.

Objective 4: Expand and enhance drug education and prevention strategies in the workplace.

Goal 4: Shield America's air, land, and sea frontiers from the drug threat.

Objective 1: Identify and implement options, including science and technology options, to improve the effectiveness of law enforcement to stop the flow of drugs into the United States, especially along the Southwest Border.

Objective 2: Lead efforts to develop stronger bilateral and multilateral intelligence sharing to thwart the use of international commercial air, maritime, and land cargo shipments for smuggling.

Objective 3: Conduct flexible interdiction in the transit zone to ensure effective use of maritime and aerial interdiction capabilities.

Goal 5: Break foreign and domestic drug sources of supply.

Objective 1: Destroy major trafficking organizations by arresting, convicting, and incarceration their leaders and top associates, and seizing their drugs and assets.

Objective 2: Reduce the foreign availability of drugs through eradication and other programs that reduce drug crop cultivation and through enforcement efforts to attack chemical, money laundering, and transportation networks that support trafficking organizations.

Objective 3: Reduce all domestic drug production and availability and continue to target for investigation and prosecution those who illegally divert pharmaceuticals and listed chemicals.

Objective 4: Increase the political will of countries to cooperate with the United States on drug control efforts through aggressive diplomacy, certification, and carefully targeted foreign assistance.

Objective 5: Strengthen host nation institutions so that they can conduct more effective drug control efforts on their own and withstand the threat that narcotics trafficking poses to sovereignty, democracy, and free-market economies. In the source countries, aggressively support the full range of host nation interdiction efforts by providing training and operational support.

Objective 6: Make greater use of multilateral organizations to share the burdens and costs of international narcotics control to complement the efforts of the United States and to institute programs where the United States has limited or not access.